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Against Germany

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Unforgotten

I'd been working in the OR since 8A.M. and at 5 P.M. my energy reached the subzero level. It was a hectic and difficult day and all my patients had serious medical problems.

The 5 P.M. syndrome of somnolence and weariness in every bone crawls into my body and refuses to leave. In the anesthesia office, the untidy room next to the OR, my colleague, Liesel, is on the phone, "*Schatzi*," she says in German to her husband, "*jawohl, ich komme gleich.*" I enjoy her conversation in a language I understand and speak quite well. I have the ear for its sound and flowing rhythm; I like its difficult but logic grammar, its long-paired words and the unique phrase structure. I had never associated Liesel's German with the barking sounds I had heard more than 40 years ago, during the war, when the language was littered with a Nazi lexicon that grated on my ears and caused palpitations. Liesel was far removed from Hitler's Germany geographically and ideologically for she is an ethnic German born in Bolivia. She is for me the epitome of the other Germany, the Germany of refined culture, tolerance, freedom and progress.

The 5 P.M. syndrome keeps me in its lasting power but I must interview patients scheduled for tomorrow's surgery. First on my list is Hans Dietrich Schmidt. He's Schmidt, not Smith, and Hans Dietrich is unmistakable *Deutsch*.

His bed covered with a snow-white blanket, near the window, with a sweeping vista of the Prospect Park, is impeccable clean. Shining slippers wait in "*Achtung*"

position under the bed and a blue robe is folded neatly at the foot of the bed. Strange, but the US-made inanimate accessories acquired already a Teutonic flair for detailed organization. And then he is, Hans Dietrich himself, his eyes a bright blue must have been quite beautiful forty years ago. The blue pajamas lend color to his gray-blue eyes making him look like shades of a blue palette. His blond hair has a touch of silver-gray and is neatly brushed and slicked back. He is neither fat nor thin, and towers over me even when he is sitting in bed. Schmidt is greeting me with a kind smile of good manners and radiates that sure-of-himself feeling. A picture perfect, well preserved, old fashioned gentleman. His fluent English has a tinge of his native German and he likes to intermingle English with German.

“ You’re the anesthesiologist, *die Narkotiserin*..” He says and continues to scrutinize me, “I rather expected a male-doctor, but I’m not a chauvinist-pig, *Frau-Doktor*.” The examination must be orderly and short, I am reminding myself, while asking routine questions.

Allergies? The cold-metallic blue eyes look at me intensively before he says “none”

Past medical history: Frostbite on the Eastern front followed by amputation of two toes, right foot, in 1944. He shows me the stumps with a pained face.

Schmidt interrupts me suddenly in a military tone of one who had been through years of army service. “ I recognize a familiar accent. Are you Polish? Where are you from? ”

“ I’m from Lodz, Poland. “

“ Litzmannstadt” he corrects me and his eyes acquire a nostalgic softness as if the city brought back pleasant memories.

Litzmannstadt! I feel an icy shudder, and a chill starts in me and trickles down. The Nazis changed the name of my native Lodz to Litzmannstadt and the usurped name brings back, and stirs memories, which I had hoped to forget.

" I stationed there from 1942 till 1943 in the Kriminal Polizei in Litzmannstadt-Ghetto. I wasn't an interrogator; I was a soldier, a young, 18 years old boy, *ein Knabe*, guarding their building. I had a very good time in your city before they sent me to the Eastern front. I was in love with a Polish *panna*." He talks in a bragging tone of voice and his remarks sound casual, as an American might speak of vacation in Acapulco. And so the "*panna*" evoked the sentimental look in his eye and Lodz, a rather drab and ugly city, is only a background for this wartime romance.

He was a soldier in the KRIPO, the most feared Nazi institution in the ghetto. Kripo was a Nazi special agency of torture in addition to hunger, diseases, and deportation. They occupied a former rectory, a beautiful redbrick house, straight from the brother Grimms tales, located in a bucolic garden. In the cellar of this "*Märchen-Haus*" the combined and brutal forces of Kripo and Gestapo interrogated and demanded, from the beaten to a bloody pulp Jews, dollars, gold and diamonds. The prisoners seldom left the cellar alive and the corpses were sent to the families for burial. Kripo called my father who had as his whole possession, a few thousand worthless Polish zlotys, and his life savings from before the war. They came with my father to our apartment to retrieve the money hidden in the wall- two Germans in civilian clothes and a young man in uniform. My father's face was bluish with two slits of eyes and an open wound where it was once his nose. He mumbled for his lips were swollen and the gums bled. Bubbles of air like small grapes accumulated above the sausage of the upper lip. He walked like a duck, swaying on his unsteady legs, and looked at us from the slits of his eyes as if to say, " I'm finished. I can't take it." The zlotys he gave the Nazis made them furious.

" *Du Dreck*, we don't need zlotys, where are the dollars?" screamed the Hunchback, a familiar and feared by us Kripo man, and he kned my father in the groin, struck him in the pulp of his face and lowered him to the floor stamping on him with the heel of his foot. His footwork was like a ritual dance and I couldn't look anymore at this

Quasimodo dancing on my father's body. The ugly stamp of sadism was on his brutal and savage face. But the young soldier, as if his eyes were plucked out, yawned widely out of sheer boredom showing a mouth-full of white teeth and a pink palate freckled with brown-black spots. In his stony face there was no crack in which compassion for another human being could take root, and I despised him for the coldness of his heart-he was so young and yet so inhuman.

"I was in Lodz-Ghetto." I said and shifted the topic explaining the two types of anesthesia suitable for his operation. I felt that the conversation had gone the wrong way on a verboten-territory. His smile disappeared but then quickly returned. I could hear his breathing, rapid and heavy. He remained speechless and a silence of embarrassment hung in the air.

"In Lodz- Ghetto." He repeated turning the eyes on me with a wondering look and added quickly. "Sorry, I was too young to understand what was going on. I was only a soldier." He went on spitting out words of apology; He recited a phony alibi, and a kind of Nuremberg defense I had heard thousand times before.

"My life was not a bowl of cherries either. I was on the Eastern front." Almost by a way of an afterthought he asked in an Inquisitor-like tone. "How did you survive? " And smiled, but the bravado of his smile couldn't conceal his discomfort. He knew well that it was almost impossible to survive, and I am not going to satisfy his curiosity. "OK" I said in a good-clear voice, but I felt tightness in my chest while my heart was beating fast in a tumult of emotions. My head was so light, as if suspended in the air. "Spinal or epidural would be the best and safest anesthesia for the excision of hemorrhoids. I'll see you tomorrow morning." It signaled the end of the conversation. Schmidt detected something in my eyes for he didn't ask more.

I couldn't sleep that night. Why does an old, forty-three years old scar hurt so much? I must tear down the wall in my head," I talked to myself, "it's 1985, and the time of forgiving has arrived. Don't demonize Hans Dietrich Schmidt, he's a harmless,

pleasant, well-adjusted citizen of a country that adopted him and me. We both grafted ourselves successfully into a multiethnic family of the New World far away from the killing fields of Poland. I must leave all the ghosts of my past in their habitat. Perhaps Schmidt, who seems anything but a contemplative or self-aware person, had little knowledge of what was going on and he is not the heartless soldier who had witnessed the beating of my father without a trace of humanness in his eyes.”

The following day was a sunny, beautiful day, a perfect day for a person willing to come to peace with an inner battle, a day that had asked for cordial solutions.

“ How are you, Mr. Schmidt? I hope you had a good night sleep.”

I asked Hans Dietrich who was sheeted on a gourney and wheeled into the waiting area of the OR.

“ *Gutten Morgen, Frau Doktor.* I slept very well.” His voice with its heavy German accent traveled well through the hall. He smiled widely and at that moment I saw the brown spots on his palate. I felt a paroxysm of abhorrence so strong that I had to distance myself from him. I couldn’t share the same air with him, and thus I knew that I couldn’t give him anesthesia, not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

